

## KEEPING FOOD SAFE DURING A POWER OUTAGE

Sooner or later, every home has a power outage. The electricity may have gone off during a snowstorm or thunderstorm, or the refrigerator may simply quit working. Whatever the cause, dealing with the food involved when the unit is off requires a knowledge of food safety.

USDA recommends the following guidelines:

### KEEP THE FREEZER DOOR CLOSED.

Keep what cold air you have inside. Don't open the door any more than necessary. You'll be relieved to know that a full freezer will stay at freezing temperatures about 2 days; a half-full freezer about 1 day. If your freezer is not full, group packages so they form an "igloo" to protect each other. Place them to one side or on a tray so that if they begin thawing, their juices won't get on other food. And, if you think power will be out for several days, try to find some dry ice (see box below). Although dry ice can be used in the refrigerator, block ice is better. You can put it in the refrigerator's freezer unit along with your refrigerated perishables such as meat, poultry, and dairy items.

#### Handling Dry Ice

- To locate a distributor of dry ice, look under "ice" or "carbon dioxide" in the phone book.
- Buy 25 pounds of dry ice to keep a 10 cubic-foot freezer full of food safe 3 to 4 days; half full, 2 to 3 days. A full 18 cubic-foot freezer requires 50 to 100 pounds of dry ice to keep food safe 2 days; half full, less than 2 days.
- Handle dry ice with caution and in a well-ventilated area. Don't touch it with bare hand; wear gloves or use tongs.
- Wrap dry ice in brown paper for longer storage. One large piece lasts longer than small ones.
- The temperature of dry ice is  $-216^{\circ}\text{F}$ ; therefore, it may cause freezer burn on items located near or touching it. Separate dry ice from the food using a piece of cardboard.

### EVEN IF FOOD HAS STARTED TO THAW, SOME FOODS CAN BE SAFELY KEPT.

The foods in your freezer that partially or completely thaw before power is restored may be safely refrozen if they still contain ice crystals or are  $40^{\circ}\text{F}$  or below. You will have to evaluate each item separately. See the attached charts for different frozen and refrigerated foods. Generally, be very careful with meat and poultry products or any food containing milk, cream, sour cream, or soft cheese. When in doubt, throw them out.

### MANY FOODS CAN BE REFROZEN WITHOUT MUCH CHANGE IN TASTE.

Partial thawing and refreezing may reduce the quality of some foods. Raw meats and poultry from the freezer can usually be refrozen without too much quality loss. Prepared foods, vegetables, and fruits can normally be refrozen, but there may be some quality loss. Fruit juices can be refrozen safely without much quality loss, but frozen fruit will become mushy.

In general, refrigerated items should be safe as long as power is out no more than 4 hours. Keep the door closed as much as possible. Discard any perishable foods (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and leftovers) that have been above 40 °F for 2 hours or more, and any food that has an unusual odor, color, or texture, or feels warm to the touch.

**KEEP AN APPLIANCE THERMOMETER IN THE REFRIGERATOR AND FREEZER AT ALL TIMES.**

This will remove the guesswork of just how cold the unit is because it will give you the exact temperature. The key to determining the safety of foods in the refrigerator and freezer is knowing how cold they are. The refrigerator temperature should be 40 °F or below; the freezer, 0 °F or lower.

**BE PREPARED** for all power outages. If you live in an area where loss of electricity from summer or winter storms is a problem, you can plan ahead to be prepared for the worst.

- Stock up on shelf-stable foods – canned goods, juices, and "no-freeze" entrees.
- Plan ahead how you can keep foods cold. Buy some freeze-pak inserts and keep them frozen. Buy a cooler. Freeze water in plastic containers or store bags of ice.
- Know in advance where you can buy dry and block ice.
- Develop emergency freezer-sharing plans with friends in another part of town or in a nearby area.

These are rule-of-thumb guides. For the actual handling of specific foods, follow the instructions in the following charts. Be sure to discard any fully cooked items in either the freezer or the refrigerator that have come into contact with raw meat juices. Remember, you can't rely on appearance or odor. Never taste food to determine its safety! Some foods may look and smell fine, but if they've been at room temperature too long, bacteria that cause foodborne illness can begin to grow very rapidly. Some types will produce toxins that are not destroyed by cooking.

For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or eggs, call the toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1 (800) 535-4555; Washington, DC area, (202) 720-3333; TTY 1 (800) 256-7072. It is staffed by home economists, registered dietitians, and food technologists weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time, year round. An extensive selection of food safety recordings can be heard 24 hours a day by using a touch-tone phone.

The media may call Bessie Berry, Manager, USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, at (202) 720-5604.

Information is also available from the FSIS Web site: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>